

EXPANDING THE USE OF STATE DEFENSE FORCES IN HOMELAND DEFENSE MISSIONS

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Current high operational tempo of the active force and the federalized reserves makes it difficult to find adequate numbers of forces to accomplish the many homeland defense missions. As planners attempt to apply the right forces to the proper mission, they need to consider State Defense Forces (SDFs). Planners may be unaware of these forces' existence; however, they represent an important source of capable manpower to apply within the borders of the various states in the Global War on Terrorism. As the Army continues to send active and reserve forces to new locations like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Philippines, in addition to longstanding missions in Kosovo, Bosnia, Korea, and the Sinai, it is important to tap every available resource. We need to examine how SDFs can be used to relieve the pressure on other soldiers.

SDFs were first used extensively early in the 20th century when the National Guard of many states was mobilized and sent to combat overseas. Some states' governors were ill-prepared to cope with subsequent natural and manmade disasters, so they directed the formation of replacement units. The SDFs' were first used during the Mexican Border Campaign of 1916-17, and also in World Wars I and II, and in the Korean War. Referred to as State Guards or Home Guards, many of these replacement soldiers had credible and even distinguished prior military experience and ably filled the void.

Twenty-two states and Puerto Rico have SDF units. They are recognized under Title 32 US Code and are under direct control of each state Adjutant General. The units augment the National Guard regularly, assisting in search and rescue, providing legal and medical services, applying expertise in information technology, and working in Emergency Operations Centers. They also fulfill missions similar to what they have done since the early 1900s, such as response to disasters and critical infrastructure protection.

Minimal costs are associated with maintaining SDFs, since weekend and annual training is done on a volunteer basis in a nonpay status. That same voluntary basis applies to most of the missions the SDFs are assigned; the SDF personnel are paid only while on state active duty. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, for example, the activated State Defense Forces of both Alaska and New York were paid for the few weeks they were on state active duty to augment the federalized National Guard forces. Their normal volunteer status makes it relatively inexpensive to maintain the SDF as a force-in-being; the minimal equipment they possess also keeps maintenance and logistical costs low.

Despite their clear virtues, the Federal Government seems split on its support for SDFs. Both the Department of Defense and the National Guard Bureau support the

development and employment of SDFs, viewing them as a logical choice to fulfill state duties during the absence of the National Guard. However, limited federal support exists for funding to make this happen. Congress readily approved the necessary legislation for SDFs to exist, but Congressional leaders are also quick to emphasize that the states themselves should fund them since they are formed in response to state problems.¹ The attacks of 9/11 show that “state problems” can quickly turn into federal ones; the same is true of natural disasters, like hurricanes or power outages.

To use these forces effectively, numerous issues must be resolved. A state’s liability for an SDF soldier’s actions as a volunteer needs to be defined. Training standards (and personal standards, like individual height-and-weight requirements) have to be addressed; a unit of volunteers might have difficulty meeting the demanding standards of regular Army units. Personal rank, especially for officers, in SDF units traditionally is much higher than expected for the units’ small size. Also, no consensus has formed on how SDF units should be organized and equipped. Predominantly they are seen as replacements for the National Guard’s role of support to state authorities for preservation of life, protection of property, and the maintenance of law and order, principally during natural disasters. Some, though, insist that there could be a combat role for SDFs.

SDFs can be effective, even when given inadequate funding and training, as history has shown. It could be that SDFs cannot replace the deployed National Guard forces of various states. However, homeland security planners should feel obligated to explore the potential of this established system. With a minimum investment of money for salaries, added to appropriate policies that allow for effective utilization, the SDFs around the Nation, energized by the volunteer spirit that has infused Americans since 9/11, could make a valuable contribution to national security.

ENDNOTE

1. Ronald Ray Armstrong and Alexander Gisoldi, *State Defense Forces, Past, Present and Future*, Unpublished Manuscript, Sacramento, CA: California State University, 1989, pps. 39-40